

To: Suzanne Schulz

From: Kathy Quick

Date: November 12, 2009

Re: Preliminary Qualitative Data on the Green Grand Rapids Civic Engagement Process

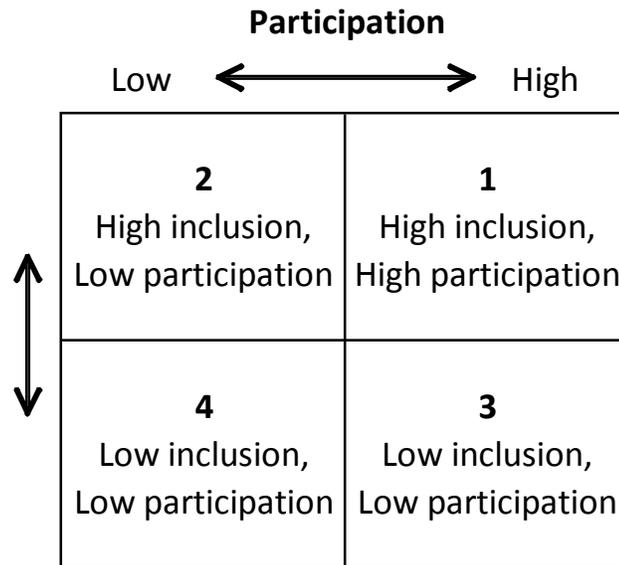
These data were collected through a qualitative social science research project on Green Grand Rapids conducted between 2007 and 2009. It is a smaller part of a study of civic engagement in Grand Rapids that has been ongoing since 1998. The research project focuses on management practices and the following research questions:

- a) How do different forms of civic engagement impact the public potential to address public problems and the quality of the policy outcomes?
- b) How may additional resources to address public challenges be generated and productively managed?
- c) What kinds of public leadership practices build public capacity, and how?

I collected these data through approximately 70 confidential interviews with city staff, members of the Steering Committee, staff of foundations supporting the project, elected and appointed members of the City Commission and Planning Commission, and members of the general public. These study participants (all of whom are identified by pseudonym below unless they were speaking in public or expressly requested to be identified by name) were selected on the basis of a theoretical sampling strategy, meaning that they are not randomly selected to be representative of the community at large, but rather invited to participate because of their intimate knowledge or interest in Green Grand Rapids or related civic engagement efforts and public problems in Grand Rapids. Data were also collected through observations of nine meetings or events, namely four Green Grand Rapids gatherings, the Ball/Perkins park design charrette, the Bike Summit, meetings of the steering committees of Green Grand Rapids and the bike summit, city staff meetings, and volunteer clean-up days organized by Friends of Grand Rapids Parks. In addition, I have analyzed meeting minutes, planning materials (data inventories, draft planning documents, maps, etc.), media coverage, blogs, etc. Analysis of these data is ongoing as part of a doctoral dissertation project in urban planning and public policy that I am completing at the University of California, Irvine, in 2009-10. I would welcome an opportunity to present my findings to interested community members sometime next fall, when I have completed my dissertation analysis of the thousands of pages of transcribed interviews and other data collected. However, I am pleased to present these findings, which should be considered *preliminary*, please.

The Steering Committee members, sponsoring foundations, and city staff and consultants were aiming to build community capacity, and seem to have been highly successful in this regard. The Green Grand Rapids process can be characterized as a highly inclusive *and* highly participatory process, in the upper right quadrant of the following typology. This is my evaluation based upon the data I have analyzed, which is to say that I think most participants in the study would affirm this, based upon their own accounts of how the process was unfolding. You may recall this typology of civic engagement processes, which I have been developing with Dr. Martha Feldman based upon our analysis of 23 civic engagement efforts in Grand Rapids, from the April 2009 Steering Committee meeting. The Green Grand Rapids process is in the highest-yielding (#1) quadrant in terms of the benefits the process has yielded for building ongoing community capacity. The hallmarks of highly participatory processes are: many people are invited to and/or do participate, efforts are made to make the process broadly accessible, and community input is collected and influences decisions. The hallmarks of highly inclusive processes are:

diverse views are engaged in a deliberative atmosphere in which new ideas and options are generated, participants decide together on the problem and goals and process, and the process integrates with other issues and across time. (Source: Quick and Feldman, "Distinguishing participation and inclusion," accepted in September 2009 for revision and resubmittal by the *Journal of Planning Education and Research*.)



Here are some of the major findings, to date, from this preliminary analysis.

1. *Green Grand Rapids has stimulated connections among issues and people by providing a venue for constructive dialogue where ideas and relationships can "pop." Equally important, it has provided a platform for that learning and capacity to be captured, for priorities to be sorted out and articulated, and for those interests and capacities to then be taken forward into implementation. Related to this, the forums and interactions facilitated by Green Grand Rapids have changed people's minds. Learning is happening, and deliberation is creating new understandings and options for action. As one observer put it, Green Grand Rapids helped to "surface the strands" (Lana 1/22/09) among a lot of issues, people, and organizations that were already present and active, but now have new connections. That has led to some new coalitions and efforts, such as the Grand Rapids Bicycle Friendly Coalition. It provided a moment and a platform for individuals to come together and coalesce around issues of common interest, such as the "return the rapids to Grand Rapids" groups. Through organized activities, it helped people who might already have been independently interested in green issues into a green community and green campaign with which they can now identify, such as by bringing designers into the process through Park(ing) Day.*

Here are some specific examples from the data:

Concerns and action around the urban forest have been present for some time. As of the original Green Grand Rapids: Ideas! kick-off gathering in June 2008, there were already many well-informed, outspoken advocates for the forest. However, the Green Grand Rapids impetus has been credited for the mayor forming an Urban Forestry Council, and the Green Grand

Rapids Steering Committee brought utility companies to task for their tree trimming policies. With that added attention and infrastructure, the urban forest advocates and issues have had more avenues and legitimacy to educate and raise expectations among the public, city staff, and public utilities about planting and maintaining trees, preserving their economic, aesthetic, and ecological value, and addressing the emerald ash bore problem. Through the Green Grand Rapids process, you could see all of the connections among issues and see the value, from many perspectives, of the urban forest and what these advocates had been saying all along. (Green Grand Rapids gathering 6/23/08, Teresa 6/24/08, Edgar 5/13/09, Ira 5/13/09, Louis 10/20/09, Daisy 11/5/09, Rachel 11/12/09).

The conventional wisdom that "streets are for cars" is giving way to a broader acceptance of the "complete streets" approach. Participants in Green Grand Rapids, the Grand Rapids Bicycle Friendly Coalition, and the Bike Summit are now frequently using the "complete streets," language, and there seems to be more use of this framework by city traffic safety staff as well (Doug 1/23/09, Bike Summit 4/24/09, Green Grand Rapids gathering 10/21/09)

The interest in "bringing the rapids" back to Grand Rapids has been on the ground for some time as an increasingly organized and vocal group of people. Those enthusiasts grabbed the Green Grand Rapids context – and the opportunity that Green Grand Rapids provided to bring downtown investors interested in the river into a common conversation about how to enhance the river's ecological, aesthetic, and economic value – to built momentum. They brought their passionate personal testimony and experiential knowledge of the beauty of the river ecosystem to the conversation, and got other people caught up in the enthusiasm and vision.

Neighbors, city staff and consultants, and mountain bikers all changed their minds somewhat about good uses for the Ball/Perkins site in the course of the day's planning charrette. (Ball/Perkins meeting 1/24/09, Roger 1/24/09, Ira 2/5/09, Dane 2/10/09)

A long-term environmental activist started "looking at waterways differently, as important bird migration routes" by doing the Green Pursuits mapping exercise at the outset of the process, and is thinking about ways to change the work she does accordingly. (Daisy, 11/5/09)

2. *Green Grand Rapids has had side-by-side, deeply intertwined goals, from the outset, of both creating a green master plan and building community capacity.* The organizers view civic engagement as both a means and end of the process:

Whereas a "short bureaucratic resolution" (source?) would have been sufficient to accomplish the state requirement to update the master plan periodically, the city's Planning Department and Parks and Recreation Department "view this as an opportunity to initiate a citywide green infrastructure master planning process" through civic engagement (http://www.grand-rapids.mi.us/index.pl?page_id=7074).

"In the end, we're going to have this really great planning document, kind of like what we did with the Master Plan and the zoning ordinance. It's 50/50: 50% of the success of the project is the process, and 50% is this great document. Neither one overpowers the other, but in the process you get that whole social dynamic that you're trying to get to, that community wisdom about a specific topic that they can talk about in an intelligent way and talk about to others in the community, and then that will also guide their decision-making process. And then you have this great document that is the institutional memory for the process and is a reference for communities to help remember what they discussed and be able to apply it through policy decisions." (Suzanne Schulz, research interview, 8/14/07)

Green Grand Rapids has helped to get individual park planning work that needed to be done, done, with a lot more community involvement and consultant support than the city would otherwise be able to afford and organize. (Ira, research interview, 1/22/09)

3. *Green Grand Rapids has truly responded to the community's interests and taken them up through a platform that builds energy, capacity, and commitment behind them.* It picked up the green theme because it was an issue that already had a lot of attention and capacity behind it. One purpose of the green theme for the master plan update was to give more credit, legitimacy, and support to existing efforts by increasing attention to them. Another purpose was to choose an issue that would engage the public, and there was so much interest in green issues that it was a super choice for bringing people out. It has propelled green work forward as a way to generate some answers and new information about questions that needed to be asked. Several study participants have said:

"We knew what the questions about green issues were, but we don't know what the answers are, and community engagement is the best way to find out." (There have been many versions of this from several people)

"What is green? For our purposes, it's a way of organizing our thinking about all the different aspects of the master plan and what direction they want to refine and move it.... We're not going to the community just to make people feel good. We are going to the community because we believe that we'll get good ideas. Anything that we implement can't be done without community support. So if we direct our implementation along the lines of people who have already indicated that they have a concern with, we believe we'll get better community behind it, better community support for what we actually do." (Louis 6/24/08)

4. *Green Grand Rapids adapted to address needs that came out from the process.* For example, the "connections" theme was originally envisioned as an umbrella for improving transportation connectivity through, for example, the expansion and linking of bicycle trails. Propelled by intense community interest, it transformed into a platform for creating bike lanes on city streets, expanding bike safety education programs, advocacy for complete streets, and seeking bike-friendly city certification (Green Grand Rapids gathering #1 fieldnotes, BFC summit fieldnotes, GRBFC steering committee meetings). The city's increasingly large and vocal constituency for better on-street bike lanes was directed to Green Grand Rapids as a forum. This move could potentially have divided the biking community, or diminished the whole range and power of the bike issue by pouring it into a "green" channel. (That move could, for example, have robbed it of some other ways of understanding the values and needs associated with it as a quality of life issue, a social equity issue, a health issue, etc.) However, the two efforts seem to have been ampliative instead. Green Grand Rapids helped the bike advocates by aligning city staff and technical consulting support for it, used its mailing list and ready audience and outreach capacities, and used the momentum behind Green Grand Rapids to strengthen the bike friendly city efforts, including through co-sponsoring (?) the Bike Friendly City Summit, celebrating the bronze BFC designation through Green Grand Rapids events, etc. And the bike organizing brought out people for Green Grand Rapids who might not otherwise have participated, occasionally causing conflict in the process (ex. backlash against the "multi-purpose natural surface trail" deluge of advocates and votes at the Ball/Perkins meeting). In my opinion - though I've never asked people about it so I don't have data on it - Green Grand Rapids provided a forum for the various different biking constituencies (i.e., the roadies and the mountain bikers) to come into conversation with one another through the Green Grand Rapids process. Those relationships, and their growing understanding and appreciation for their collective range of concerns and capacities, then spilled over into the bike summit organizing and the GR bike-friendly coalition.

5. *The process was not as diverse as desired.* There is variation within the “high inclusion, high participation” quadrant in the table above, and the Green Grand Rapids process could have been even more participatory and inclusive. I have consistently heard concern and disappointment, from a wide variety of Steering Committee members, staff, political leaders, and members of the public that the process was not more diverse of commonly identified characteristics of socioeconomic status. Most of the time, study participants talk about this in terms of the accessibility of the process, by asking questions and voicing concerns about why the people participating were so disproportionately white and middle to upper class in comparison to the population of Grand Rapids as a whole. In my own opinion, focusing too much on the kind of bodies participating, and their age, ethnic, and class characteristics, is not going to much improve the visible diversity, and furthermore that focusing just on markers of socioeconomic diversity is not actually going to yield the community-building benefits of greater diversity. As one person said, “making a place at the table” is about setting the table, not just recruiting people to come to the table (Jenna, 4/20/09). Had the process had a broader platform of “green” issues that made a consistent point of emphasizing issues of interest and concern to lower income people – for example, people using public transit or bikes to get around town less as a green lifestyle choice and more out of economic necessity – I think there *could* have been greater diversity of issues and people that would have enriched the creative thinking and relationships that were built. In other words, as many people have indicated, just increasing the numbers or venues for activities would not have made the process more participatory or inclusive. Instead, there was a sense that the kinds of participants, breadth of commitment, and composition of the ideas might have been improved if the range of participants and issues had been more diverse.

6. *Green Grand Rapids has brought out champions for environmental issues.* I started noticing the word “champion” pop up constantly in interviews with city staff, Steering Committee members, and consultants beginning around March 2009. The process was focused thereafter on finding and uplifting champions, and it was very successful in reenergizing, uplifting, and creating champions.

It created new champions, brought new constituents to old ones, built novel relationships among champions, and caused some to re-scope their work. The champions included established organizations, such as the West Michigan Environmental Action Council, forty-year old, local umbrella organization, with a professional staff of four people, that combines advocacy, community information and education, and distribution of material resources such as rain collection barrels. Other organizations used the occasion to express their interest in extending into a new area of work and to test the waters for community support, such as the Blanford Nature Center, an environmental education center that is contemplating expanding its role as a resource center for gardeners into organizing community gardens. Through Green Grand Rapids, the urban forests group started getting lots of attention and support from political leadership and the Green Grand Rapids community, which is giving them resources to demand more protection of the city's urban forests. Other champions were individual enthusiasts who had, through Green Grand Rapids, found one another and recognized a potential channel to bring forth and realize concerns they had long held independently, like kayaking enthusiast Chip Richards, who gave a heartfelt and rousing speech at the final Green Grand Rapids community gathering about “bringing rapids back to the Grand River” and invited everyone to come out and experience the river and join their new group, Grand Rapids Whitewater. The Grand Rapids Bike Friendly Coalition introduced themselves and the whole Green Grand Rapids community celebrated a milestone that they'd achieved: the city had just been informed that it had received a bronze-level “bike friendly city” designation and had marked the occasion a few hours before the Green Grand Rapids gathering with a press conference at the trailhead of a new bike trail. (Green Grand Rapids: Call to Action! fieldnotes, 10/21/09)

Following Green Grand Rapids: a Call to Action! several people started dialoguing and encouraging one another about the idea that "our time has come" to be leaders in Grand Rapids. The Green Grand Rapids process has provided connections and legitimacy for issues that they've cared about for a long time, and the process called for champions to come forward to carry out the work, it concluded with a call from Greg Sundstrom to "do this for ourselves," so now these community leaders feel empowered and energized to lead the way (Daisy, 11/4/09; also Steve Faber's note on Facebook and the reactions to it).

7. Green Grand Rapids is a model for how to rethink government in these tough times. Green Grand Rapids began with the expectation that, among other things, it would articulate a set of priorities and draft programs and plans, built through a consensus-oriented process, that the city could then implement or shop to funders. The assumption was that civic engagement would help to produce creative new ideas, build constituencies, and provide legitimacy for the new efforts, or perhaps build steam to "perform CPR" to resuscitate the city's struggling parks and recreation programs (Ira 6/26/08). By mid-way through the Green Grand Rapids process, however, it was increasingly obvious that funding would be a severe constraint on implementation. Bringing out champions and framing the final meeting not as a completed menu but as a "call to action" were the response, a – to my knowledge quite unusual, and very exciting – way to carry the work forward and rethink the work of government.

This doesn't mean that all of the desired work will get done; numerous city staff people and Steering Committee members said, as of the final Green Grand Rapids forum, that the work was "just beginning" or that there was "still a lot to be done" (Abby 10/21/09) to get the plans laid out, that it was unclear how to proceed (Louis 10/20/09, Niel 10/21/09), or that progress was "paralyzed" by the lack of funding and staff resources (Ira 10/21/09, Dane 10/21/09). Nonetheless, generally the mood in the room at the Green Grand Rapids was extremely positive. Steering Committee chair Jack Hoffman called on the group to exercise their "green power" for change (10/21/09). People affirmed to me afterwards that it had made them very hopeful about what could be done (Roger 10/21/09, Emil 10/21/09, Drew 10/21/09, Teresa 10/21/09, Carver 10/21/09, Rachel 10/21/09, Bill 10/21/09, Niel 10/21/09, Mel 10/21/09, Daisy 11/4/09).

At the conclusion of the community forum, newly appointed City Manager Greg Sundstrom was asked to describe the city's circumstances and role in implementing Green Grand Rapids. He stated his expectations in a somber yet hopeful message:

The state of Michigan is melting down and the city is struggling to keep basic services intact. You know this. We [the city government] have lost the capacity to make any of these wonderful things that you have just described happen. But what makes me happy is the positive energy in this room because you all are going to do this. Everything I learned in school doesn't work anymore. I learned that government is like a vending machine. People pay taxes and the city dispenses a service. We cannot do that. But we're going to be a little entrepreneurial, like Rob Bliss, like ArtPrize... like Green Grand Rapids! It's do it yourself government. As a city we are going to provide a platform for the community to come together and organize and do things. We will help you engage. Then we need you to make it happen. (Greg Sundstrom, Green Grand Rapids: Call to Action! 10/21/09)

Sitting in the audience of about 125 people, my jaw literally dropped as I heard Sundstrom say, "The city government has lost the capacity to make any of these wonderful things happen." I was alarmed that I was viewing a political suicide by a dedicated, knowledgeable, long-term public servant. On the contrary, the audience of about 125 people, apparently led by City Commissioner Rosalyn Bliss, responded to Sundstrom's speech with what the local newspaper reporter described as "cheers" (Jim Harger, 10/25/09, in *Grand Rapids Press*). Steve Faber, director of new nonprofit organization Friends of

Grand Rapids Parks, had been present and spoken at the meeting, and later blogged in response to Sundstrom's comments:

I'm thoroughly impressed with the quality [of] people and groups that have joined this "cause." I think that's the fascinating part, it is turning into a "cause". It's not just a cause to make a more sustainable Grand Rapids, but a cause to re-conceive the role of local government.... Whether its Emerald Ash Borer, Chickens in your back yard, Kayaks in the river, Mountain Bikes in parks; there is someone pushing us to think differently about how we are setting priorities and managing resources. This is going to put growing pressure on local government to be responsive as relationships and power shift. Our public servants with the skills to dialogue, facilitate, compromise and problem solve are going to be the staff that thrive in this new relationship.... Working in parks with volunteers throughout this summer has taught me that people want to pick up shovels and paint brushes and teach their kids about what it means to them to be a great neighbor and resident of Grand Rapids. But they will only pick up that shovel so many times before asking the bigger questions about where their tax dollars are going and whether we have our priorities straight in order to sustain these assets. Just as local government needs to prepare for reengagement, so too, our Green Grand Rapids Champions must find productive ways to channel our constituency opinions and passion toward the bigger goals and action plans." (Steve Faber, 10/28/09 http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=166928184931&ref=nf)